

Background

Child marriage is defined as any formal marriage or informal union between a child under the age of 18 and an adult or another child. In 2015, the United Nations introduced the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 focused on achieving gender equality and women's empowerment by 2030 and calling for the universal eradication of child marriage under Target 5.3.

However, despite receiving legal and social attention globally, this practice remains a pervasive human rights violation.

Around 650 million women alive today were married before the age of 18, and most of them are located in the African and South Asian regions.

Over one in three girls in most countries in these regions still marry before turning 18 years old, and almost one in five bear their first child before the age of 18. The COVID-19 pandemic has only further accentuated the plight, as 10 million more girls, over and above 100 million, stand at risk of child marriage by 2030.

In the Arab region, around one in five girls marry before turning 18 years of age. Though the child marriage rate in the Arab region has been declining over the last 25 years, no signs of further progress have been observed in the past decade.

Child marriage often perpetuates a cycle of poverty, low education, high fertility and poor health, which hinders societies' economic and social development. In particular, it has a greater impact on girls, as the

associated effects are long-term and often intergenerational.

Though child marriage may not lead to similar social and biological consequences for boys, it does coerce them to provide for the family prematurely and affects their career trajectory due to lack of education. Currently, at the global level, 115 million boys and men are wed before their 18th birthday, with most located in Central America.

This exercise is an extension of the earlier (Phase I) report drafted by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) on "The cost of child marriage over the life cycle of girls and women: evidence from Egypt, Iraq, Jordan and Tunisia", which outlines the social, health and economic costs of marrying young at different stages of woman's life. The report found that child marriage has negative effects on female fertility, education, labour force participation and earnings, as well as on the health of the children born to these young mothers. Furthermore, child marriage tends to have direct implications on decision-making and the prevalence of domestic violence.

The Phase II report is a continuation of the previous exercise on costing child marriage with a special focus on the aggregate economic cost of child marriage. The study estimated the economic costs of child marriage for 13 countries in the Arab region.